

# Klondike Outpost

*Dawson City holds golden memories  
of the 1898 rush to the Yukon; today  
its fortunes lie in summer visitors*

By Pat McCollom



*Klondike Kate as the belle of the Yukon; and Dawson City today*

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DAWSON CITY, former capital of Yukon Territory, sits on the bank of the Yukon River near its confluence with the Klondike. Nestled in a valley between Dawson Range and the Ogilvie Mountains, it is almost inaccessible except for a summer spur road off the Alaskan Highway and an occasional all plane. The town is suspended in time, an outdoor museum recalling the spirit of some 100,000 men and women who challenged the odds, each expecting to strike it rich in the Klondike gold rush of 1898.

The current residency numbers nowhere around 700, including older men like Black Mike Winage, a cankerous Serbian who claims to be the oldest living Yukoner, born in Serbia in 1870.

"I don't think Mike is that old," says twenty-eight-year-old Victoria Faulkner, a former Dawson resident now living in Whitehorse. "He's getting old. He came downriver with a Russian engineer around 1909 or 1910. He may be ninety-five or ninety-six but I don't think he's much older than that."

Victoria's father crossed the trail in 1898. "Mother and I followed in 1901 when the traveling was better. I was just a little girl, and attended school in a one-room schoolhouse out on Bonanza Creek. We lived on the creeks until 1913. Coming into town used to be a big day for us."

She remembers when Whitehorse was nothing more than a flat place along the riverbank where tired, wet navigators were ashore to dry out. Later, it was the terminus for the overland stage which traversed the route to Dawson every five days. It took that long for the horse-drawn open sleigh to travel the 360 miles with roadside stops every twenty-two miles in fifty-below weather. It is the terminus for the White Pass & Yukon railroad built to connect Skagway, Alaska, with the navigable waters of the Yukon in 1900.

In 1953, when Whitehorse became the capital, many government employees, like Victoria, moved there.

"I wanted to stay here," she says,

strolling along Dawson's dirt streets paved with Yukon River silt. "There was no community here then. We had only two mails a week and no telephones. It was not easy to administer, so when the highway went in it was logical to move to Whitehorse."

She often summers in Dawson and works with the Canadian government to recall from memory and to research the characters and background of the old gold rush town.

"Apple Jimmy had his stand right on that spot," she points to an empty place. "Everybody had character names then. He was a Greek who sold apples."

She frowns, passing Diamond Tooth Gertie's Gambling Hall. Here tourists can part with their pokes through a choice of blackjack, roulette or bingo, can buy their favorite hootch while watching cancan girls show some leg, and listen to a gravel-voiced singer belt out a number accompanied by rinky-tink piano.

"We used to have a lovely dining room there," Victoria laments, "very formal balls with dance cards and good orchestras. We were well-dressed and organized, not the rowdy bunch you find there now. I sort of objected to naming that place after Gertie. She married a prominent citizen named Taber and tried to forget her past. He burned to death in a hotel fire. She left after that and we never heard from her again."

Around the corner is the Palace Grand, completely rebuilt in 1962 in exact replica, right down to the wallpaper in Klondike Kate's dressing room.

Dawson was the last outpost for buckskin-clad sharpshooters and Indian scouts forced to retire from a vanishing frontier. Arizona Charlie Meadows had fought Apaches and could shoot spades off a card. He built a theater in Dawson using lumber from two beached steamboats. The theater, alternately called the Palace Grand and the Savoy, attracted performers such as Kate Rockwell, known in history as Klondike Kate. Her story is typical of many in the northern saga,

and movies have been made and at least one book written about her. Loved by all the miners who would have given anything for her hand, Kate lost her heart and her bankroll to Alexander Pantages. She later sued him for breach of promise and \$25,000 but never got it.

"Charlie Meadows went back to Arizona, then to Southern California," Victoria says, peering from under a broad-brimmed hat. "The last I heard of him he was living on some island in the Gulf of California. Kate died in poverty in Bend, Oregon. I met her when she came to marry Johnny Matson, the little Norwegian who fell in love with her the first time he saw her. But she wouldn't live in Dawson. They just corresponded. After Matson died she married an accountant."

Classed above common prostitutes, the dance hall girls were hired by saloon owners to part the miners from their money before they lost it in another vice. The girls danced only when necessary and kept the customer buying drinks. Kate, however, was a real performer who began her dancing career on the New York stage.

Women played prominent roles in the north beyond prostitutes and dance hall girls. They were schoolteachers, housewives and legitimate entrepreneurs with enough backbone to tune out dissuasion and head for an unmapped wilderness, where, like their earlier counterparts on an unsettled prairie, they suffered from loneliness and isolation.

Mrs. Thomas Lippy was one of the first white women on the creeks in Dawson. She told reporters she and her husband lived in a tent until they built a log cabin. "It is twelve feet by eight, eight logs high, with dirt floors, mud and moss roof." Everything they ate came in cans. "Things were canned that I never knew could be canned."

Ethel Bush Berry was known as the Bride of the Klondike. She married Clarence Berry of Fresno, California, in March 1896 and went with him over the Chilkoot Trail to the Yukon. They stayed in Forty Mile, an old mining area with slow but steady diggings,







til news reached them of the new strikes in Dawson. Clarence struck it rich and amassed a fortune.

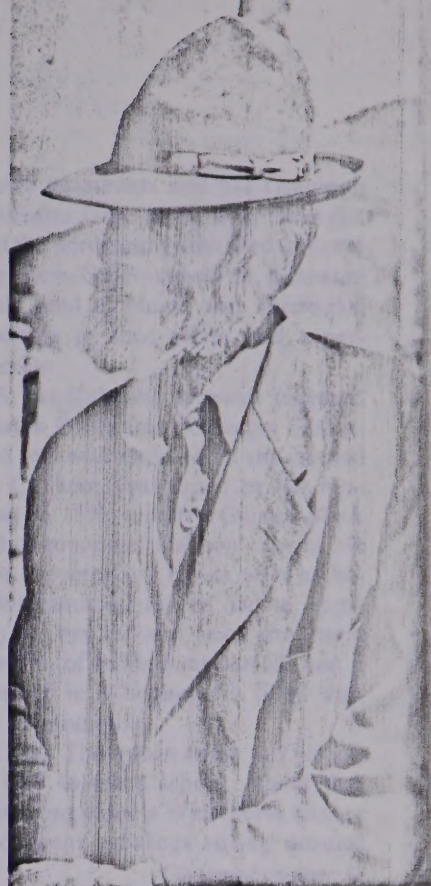
The Berrys were passengers on one of the first steamships coming out of Dawson spreading news to the world in July 1897. Banner headlines in San Francisco and Seattle newspapers trumpeted GOLD! to a nation with empty bellies. And there had been reports of dwindling gold reserves from a mining convention in Denver just weeks before.

The ensuing stampede did not build slowly but was suddenly in full bloom. Few knew how to find the Klondike, trusting their fate to the steamship companies. Since the discoveries were barely a year old there was no time to waste. The quickest route was via Seattle to Skagway, Alaska, then over a mountain pass to Lake Bennett in British Columbia. From there small boats were constructed to float the

waterways into the Yukon all the way to Dawson.

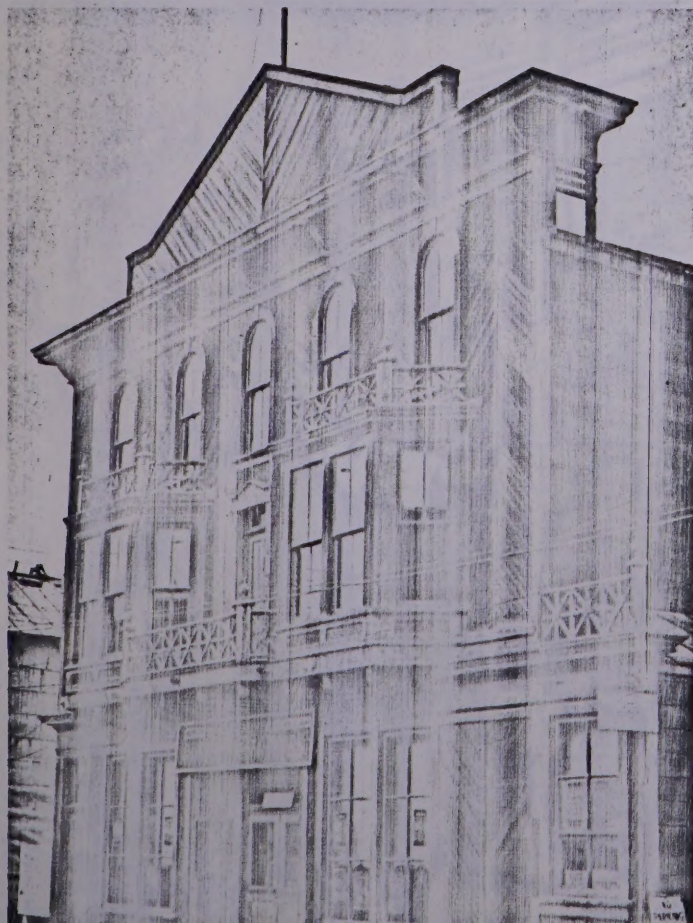
Seattle became the major port of departure, and before the turn of the century fast-buck dealers quickly slapped together eyesores called "cribs" along the waterfront where miners coming and going could be picked clean by booze, betting and prostitutes. Those with surviving money rolls met further temptation in Skagway where Jefferson Randolph "Soapy" Smith and a band of hoodlums gained daily bread through a variety of con games, including selling soap bars purportedly wrapped in large bills, and the time-proven shell game.

On the Canadian side stampedeers could expect a fair shake, thanks to those uniformed champions of justice, the North West Mounted Police. If the natural elements didn't finish them first.



*Old-timer Black Mike Winage*

*The Palace Grand Theatre*



By the time prospective miners outfitted and stood in line for passage north it was winter in Skagway. White Pass was blanketed by heavy snow and an alternate route over the Chilkoot Trail was not much better, though loose talus along the incline allowed easier mount with a predictable layer of ice. Getting across with the 1,000 pounds of supplies required by the Canadian authorities was grueling work and caused many would-be millionaires to turn back, or to set up shop along the way. At one point during the early part of 1898 an avalanche swept down the slopes suffocating more than sixty stampedeers in its path.

Of the estimated 10,000 who left for the gold fields in 1897, only about 2,000 made it before winter and were able to stake claims on the many dendritic rivers outside Dawson. For the less fortunate, after an arduous journey and vast outlay of cash, there were no claims left to stake. They became merchants, hired hands, ne'er-do-wells. Or they went back home, satisfied the experience was more valuable than gold.

Back home the excitement was up-







us. People wore buttons saying "I'm going this spring." Displays of Klondike nuggets were on exhibit coast to coast. By January 1898, the railroad trunk lines to California and the Pacific Northwest had sold more than 45,000 tickets. Steamships from Seattle and San Francisco sold out. Every vessel that could be put into service.

It struck Dawson with news of the masses headed that way. At best, food and supplies were hard to come by in winter when the frozen Yukon totally isolated Dawson from the rest of the world except for hazardous travel by dog sled. A famine might have been averted if American and Canadian governments appealed to the seasoned miners to winter elsewhere. Some more than 5,000 people stayed in Dawson that winter and prices on staples as flour and potatoes rose proportionately to their scarcity. Min-

ers, realizing they could not eat gold nuggets, reviewed their easy-come fortunes with jaundiced eyes.

By spring Dawson was a false-fronted, tin-roofed "Paris of the North," burgeoning each day with new arrivals. While miners worked the creeks, schoolhouses, a library and stores of all types added respectability to the town.

Yet it also crawled with seedy elements. Miners holed up on creeks all week wanted someplace to spend their money and have a good time. A red-light district called Lousetown across the Klondike obliged, offering untold pleasures if one could stumble safely across the foot bridge after an excess of John Barleycorn in the Dawson dance halls.

Few kept their wealth, spending lavishly as if the earth would forever replenish the source. Some, like Wilson Mizner of California's Brown

Derby restaurants and Sid Grauman of theater fame along with Pantages, quit the north and grubstaked fortunes elsewhere. Others stayed on, following fickle gold to Nome and Fairbanks, investing in shoe stores and supermarkets.

A handful held Dawson together. Martha Purdy from Chicago, Illinois, who was with child when she crossed the Chilkoot abandoned by her husband in 1898, married George Black and commanded Dawson's social life from Government House after he became commissioner of Yukon Territory. In her autumn years she was a member of Parliament herself, and a museum in Whitehorse is filled with her memorabilia.

Laura Thompson came to Dawson in 1907 to teach school. About that time along came a Whitehorse banker who spent evenings sitting around

*Continued on page 72*

*citizens proudly displayed one and one-half tons of gold bricks and dust in 1901*









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Continued from page 23

Dawson bars listening to old-timers spin yarns which he wove into poetry. The Klondike was already a legend and Robert Service's poems relived it.

The schoolteacher was escorted to a dance by Robert Service, but married Frank Berton, father of her son, Pierre, whose definitive history, *Klondike* (McClelland and Stewart Limited, Toronto, 1958), again brings the era back to life. In her autobiography, *I Married the Klondike*, Laura Berton wrote about Dawson's final years, the steamers carrying away passengers who never returned. "Every last soul on the boat pretended to be returning the following spring, but in point of fact few ever did." The quitters waited for the very last boat, the last one out before freeze up. "Thus, it became more than just another boat leaving town; it became a symbol of the town's decay."

The flamboyance was gone from the city of gold. Buildings were boarded up, some since 1900, occasionally with contents intact because shipping rates were too costly to send them elsewhere.

Time passed and Dawson waited, residents salvaging what they could until the government stepped in about five years ago with a \$10 million restoration program projected through 1985. When completed, Dawson likely will become part of an international Klondike park, along with portions of Alaska and Seattle.

Meanwhile, as tourists gawk and listen glazed-eyed to a recitation of "The Shooting of Dan McGrew," Pete Brady ambles down a lonesome side road toward his room at the Westminster, a third-rate hotel built in 1899. Pete found a little gold, enough to get him back to New York one year and a return ticket to Dawson when he couldn't take the big city.

"Pete says we should have married," Victoria Faulkner chides. "You can tell how tight he is by how far over he's bent."

When not in his cups, he flashes enough money to attract someone who will share a bottle of vodka and listen to stories of French Camille. He sold

his claim some time ago to local miners.

The creeks around Dawson have been worked and reworked, dried up by the remains of worthless tailings spit from the mouths of giant dredges long before conservation was an everyday word. Yet the quest goes unabated. Sunday miners spend weekends working abandoned claims. About 99 percent of the old claims are staked annually for a minimal registration fee.

Art Frye came to the Yukon in 1929 as a young boxer, age seventeen. He mined from dredges for the Yukon Consolidated Gold Corporation for twenty-two years. Today he has property at Grand Forks, a one-time town on the edge of Dawson which was chewed up by dredges long ago.

Art and his wife use two Caterpillars to push dirt into sluice boxes and wash it out with running water. They take out fine gold dust and sometimes a few coarse nuggets. "We don't sell the coarse gold to the bank," Art says. "We keep some for inflation or sell it to jewelers. They pay as much as \$300 to \$400 per ounce. It's premium stuff."

He thinks one of the worst things that ever happened to the country was "when the big companies started coming in here. All these years we could have had little operations all around the creeks. Now you have to cut into the hillside and do cat work. The little operators would still be here. The big companies are all gone. They were just here to loot."

Loot, nonetheless, is being returned in the form of greenbacks brought in by more than 40,000 tourists each summer who stand reverently in awe where a few found gold but more found themselves. The old buildings, some 200 of them, stand swaybacked with empty window sockets, lining the streets like discarded cadavers drying in the wind. They creak and whisper of days that will live forever in human minds.

Come the snows and Dawson is tinted by sky hues of pink and azure, hoarfrost dripping enchantingly from winter trees; the mighty Yukon freezes, fashioning a quiet wonderland until the ice crashes north to the Bering Sea and this summer place is again open for business.



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